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Managua and a test of wills

MANAGUA, Nicaragua — They seemed like sincere men, come with open minds to see for themselves what Nicaragua was really all about.

They came, they saw and after 19 hours and some minutes, they taxied past the drab Soviet attack helicopters and lifted off from Managua's shabby little airport in their immaculate White House jet. Back on Capitol Hill, the nine Republican congressmen who flew down courtesy of President Reagan to eyewitness the truth vigorously reported it: that one's worst fears had a name, and it was Sandinista.

The lightning tour was the first major delegation of U.S. officials here in almost a year. Even so, what the legislators told their colleagues about Nicaragua apparently didn't swing enough votes in the House of Representatives behind President Reagan's request for $100 million in aid to anti-Sandinista rebels.

And with Thursday's defeat of the $100 million, attention immediately turned to the half-dozen congressional compromises that had emerged, most proposing to revive moribund U.S.-Nicaraguan bilateral talks while military aid to the insurgents is kept on ice for a few months.

But if few new facts were found on the trip, the delegation did bring some advance warning that what the United States and Nicaragua might once have found to discuss has perhaps already evaporated in the heat of Washington rhetoric.

"It's a show," one Nicaraguan official decided as the nine grinned upon arrival for a herd of jostling TV cameramen. "They all support Reagan. What's to see?"

"It was a dance," Rep. Robert Dornan of California concluded as he and the others left a brief meeting with Nicaraguan Vice President Sergio Ramirez.

Before the visit ended with asides that it had been a "dodge" by one side or a "farce" by the other, it became clear that both sides' dismissals were pre-packaged in the distrust that defines relations between the Reagan administration and the Sandinistas.

The congressmen of course could not take the Sandinistas at their word because, knowing what they had learned in Washington, the legislators saw Communists bent on totalitarian control of Nicaragua. Sandinista officials, recalling statements by other Reagan administration supporters, saw men obsessed with their destruction, men they could not afford to take seriously.

Amid a flurry of "inadequate" answers to "ridiculous" questions about massive Sandinista human rights violations, someone inquired about a variation on the basic issue: Would the Sandinistas negotiate with the U.S.-backed rebels if the Congress stopped assisting them? The answer, as it has been to all other formulations of the question, was no.

On departure, the congressmen claimed to have been told in their headlong rush of Embassy-arranged meetings with opposition press, church and political and human rights officials that whatever pressure they could put on the Sandinistas would be appreciated.

The policy conclusions were not surprising. "A tremendous reaffirmation of what I believed already," said Rep. David Dreier of California. "If I had any doubts about what is happening here, I have seen that this is a totalitarian society that is not about to change unless it is forced to change."

The questions that few if any of the lawmakers appeared to have posed were whether or how the Sandinista leadership could be forced to change to a style of government more in line with American sensibilities.

The congressmen heard opposition pleas for help as cries for more aid to the counterrevolutionary rebels, or contras. But one has to wonder how closely anyone was listening, and how realistically one might have weighed their words against those of the Sandinistas.

As the debate over the $100 million has intensified, President Reagan has suggested in the most all-or-nothing terms that Americans face a choice between Soviet-backed tyranny and democratic freedom. And, as the Sandinistas have cracked down harder and harder on their remaining internal critics, he has won many over to the view.

Rebel war to oust the Sandinistas or pressure them into new elections has been the primary means the president has entertained for reaching the goal.

Even in these bonanza days for contingency planning departments at the CIA and Pentagon, few analysts seem to believe that the administration can muster enough military power to excise the Sandinistas quickly in a U.S. invasion or the public support to take time doing the job.

But after a solid year of Sandinista battlefield gains and political consolidation, it appears that the rebels alone will be incapable of defeating the Sandinistas militarily or forcing negotiations, regardless of the training and ammunition they are given.

If it remained less than clear from listening to Sandinista leaders, nationalistic Marxist-Leninists who have shown their determination to run Nicaragua in 18 years as guerrillas and nearly seven as governors, the public as of last week has a rather extraordinary House Intelligence Committee report to consider.

Not only would it require American combat forces to overthrow the Sandinistas, the report said, but the U.S. intelligence community has seriously doubted that the Sandinistas would ever risk talks with the contras.

So, gagging after months locked in a closet, the option of negotiating with the Sandinistas suddenly stumbles back onto the floors of Congress. And what, at this point, can the United States find to negotiate with Nicaragua?

The notion that diplomatic pressure might nudge the Sandinistas into new elections, much less power-sharing with the contras, is implausible enough to seem absurd. The United States has not demanded it elsewhere in Central America where less legitimate balloting has taken place, a point the

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Sandinistas are the first to make.

More important, even if the United States were to back away from the idea of vaporizing the present structure of Nicaraguan government or come up with a new formula, a three-month bout of intensive negotiations punctuated by pseudo declarations of war is doomed to failure.

If the Congress conceives new talks as a means to the goal that the contras apparently cannot achieve, it has failed to listen to the Sandinistas, or to U.S. intelligence analysts. If, as with the Central American debut of special envoy Phillip Habib, diplomatic initiatives are aimed at shoring up support for the rebel aid program, they will only deepen bilateral mistrust.

As far as the Sandinistas, their East Bloc allies and some Latin and Western nations are concerned, revolutionary rule in Nicaragua is a historical fact. Its policies may well be subject to some negotiation, and one can argue the pluses and minuses of pressure in the process. But to the Sandinista leadership, no well meaning congressman, nor any American administration, is going to overcome them in a test of wills.

Cuba's deputy foreign minister, Ricardo Alarcon, may well have expressed the Sandinistas' view more clearly than the Nicaraguans themselves.

"It's a matter of principle," he told The Herald last month in explaining Cuba's determination to further arm the Sandinistas if U.S. support for the contras was increased. "You should never withdraw in the face of an aggressor, you should never appease."

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